

A STUDY OF LUKE 23:43

by William M. Wachtel

"Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise'" (NIV).

This text is often quoted in support of the popular teaching that the dead are conscious and that the righteous go to paradise or to heaven as soon as they die. Jesus and the repentant thief to whom He made the promise of paradise were crucified together and died the same day. So it is assumed that this promise involved their survival as conscious "souls" or "spirits" that could travel to a place of bliss immediately after death. If this is assumed, it is natural to see in this text a strong support for what is called "the immortality of the soul."

Several problems arise, however, when this text is so used. First of all, the Bible nowhere says that man is now immortal or that his "soul" or "spirit" continues to live on when his body dies. In fact, the Bible states that God "alone is immortal" (1 Tim. 6:16) and that human immortality can come only through resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:23,50-54).

Secondly, the Bible teaches that the dead are "asleep" and that they "know not anything" (Eccl. 9:5). The Apostle Paul's discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 mentions over and over again that the dead in Christ are sleeping. Jesus promised that He would "wake" Lazarus up when He raised him from the dead (John 11:11-14).

Thirdly, "paradise" is never described in the Bible as a place that is in heaven or that is now in existence somewhere. (We will consider below Paul's use of the word in 2 Corinthians 12.) The word is of Persian origin, meaning "park" or "garden," and is used in the Septuagint--the Greek translation of the Old Testament--to refer to the Garden of Eden, in Genesis 2 and 3. The Book of Revelation uses the word to describe the restored paradise that will be on the New Earth after Jesus comes back to this planet to carry out the promised "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:19-21; Rev. 2:7; 21:5; 22:2,14,19).

Why, then, does the text seem to say that Jesus and the thief would somehow be in paradise the same day they died? We believe that the Bible does not contradict itself and that there must be a Scriptural solution to the apparent problem.

When we look at the early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, we discover that there was no punctuation in them. Punctua-

tion was later added by the editors to make for easier reading. Punctuation, then, is a matter of editorial interpretation and, while convenient, is not necessarily correct in every case.

An example of incorrect punctuation in our English Bibles--later corrected--is found in Hebrews 10:12. The early editions of the King James Version read: "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins, forever sat down on the right hand of God." Placing the comma *before* the word "forever" means that

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Jesus will remain in heaven always and never return to earth. This is an obvious contradiction to the oft-repeated promise that He will come again some day! When the editors realized their error, they moved the comma to **follow** the word "forever." Present editions show this change, which places stress on the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus. The original Greek text of Hebrews 10:12 (and the rest of the New Testament) has no commas, so translators supply them according to what seems to them to be the correct sense. Probably in most cases they have done a good job in the way they have inserted punctuation into their translation. We believe, however, that there is evidence available to show that the comma in Luke 23:43 has been wrongly placed in most of our English versions of the Bible! If one already believes that the dead are conscious and that people can go to paradise as soon as they die, one can easily place the comma before "today." If one believes that the Bible teaches that the dead are asleep and that paradise will be restored only at some future time, then one will place the comma **after** "today." The Greek text will permit either of these placements of the comma!

It should be noted that scholars have recognized that "today" is often used as a Hebrew way of stressing a command or promise. We see this over and over in the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses warns the people of Israel "today" that they must obey their God. It is not that they must obey Him today only, but the warning is given "today" (Deut. 4:40; 5:1; 6:6; 7:11; 8:1,11 etc.). We use a similar emphasis in English when we say, "I'm telling you this **right now!**" Such a statement implies more than is expressed by the present tense of the verb: it means that we want the hearer to take heed to our words!

Let's experiment with placing the comma *after* "today" in Luke 23:43: "Truly I tell you today, You will be with me in paradise." (A word-for-word translation of the Greek text is: "Truly to you I say today with me you will be in the paradise"). With such a rendering, the emphasis is on the promise itself--that of being with Jesus in paradise. The word "today" is there to give solemn assurance that the promise will be fulfilled.

The fact that the Greek text reads "the" paradise suggests that Jesus has in mind the definite and well-known paradise described in Scripture--the Garden of Eden restored. "Paradise" is not simply a vague concept, denoting a condition of bliss, as it has come to be used. It is a specific place that will be restored at a specific time!

The Apostle Paul's use of the term "paradise" in 2 Corinthians 12:3 needs discussion at this point. He is talking about "visions and revelations from the Lord" (verse 1). Among these he describes one in which a person was "caught up" or "caught away" into the "third heaven" (verse 2), or "the paradise" (verse 3). He does not know whether this vision was "in the body" or "out of the body"--whether the person so transported perceived it as one of being moved bodily or in another way. (Compare Ezekiel's visions, in which he seemed transported bodily from

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Babylon to Jerusalem.) The term "third heaven" may be understood as third either in **place** or in **time**. Some think Paul means "third" in a geographical or locational sense. But the Apostle Peter tells us that the New Heavens and Earth will be third as a matter of **time-sequence** (2 Peter 3:3-13). We propose that what Paul is saying is that in a vision this person was taken into the future and saw things as they will be on the New Earth, the **time** of the "third heaven," when "the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7) will be restored!

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